The Equality March

Media Response to the Poznań Equality March

Izabela Kowalczyk

Equality Marches are organized to draw attention to minority issues and counteract discrimination. We hope to provoke public discussion about tolerance. Our Marches also serve as a litmus test of democracy by raising such questions as: How democratic is the public sphere? Does this space belong to all of us or has it been appropriated by the majority? Is our society mature enough to give differences a voice? After all, democracy needs differences and we need to get used to their existence.

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One such discussion about democracy was provoked by the Poznań Equality March of November 19, 2005. Officially banned, it did take place as an act of civil disobedience, and was broken up by the police. When banning the March on November 15, the Poznań Mayor Ryszard Grobelny justified his decision by invoking the issue of public safety which could allegedly be jeopardized by the very same people who had staged a brawl during the previous year's March. The ban was upheld by Andrzej Nowakowski, the Governor of Wielkopolskie Province, who used the same rationale: that valuable property, including shop windows and flowerbeds, might be destroyed.

For the organizers this ban was a clear violation of the constitutional law while the justification was a cover-up for the real reasons, the most significant being that the right wing parties opposed the March. Already after the 2004 Equality March, the Poznań City Council passed a curious resolution that called on the Mayor to never again allow "a demonstration promoting homosexual behavior" to take place in the city (December 7, 2004). A dangerous thing happened: the city elders called for a violation of the constitutional law.

When we announced the March this year, we were put under pressure once again. Members of the Law and Justice party insisted that the March should not take place. Together with the League of

Polish Families and the All-Polish Youth, Law and Justice accused us of promoting homosexual behavior. Active in this campaign were also representatives of the Catholic church, including Bishop Marek Jędraszewski. On November 11, 2005 the bishop publicly appealed to the city authorities to ban the March, which, in his words, is an assault on the law of God and undermines the credibility of the invitation extended by the city authorities to Pope Benedict XVI. These were not the only indignant and condemning voices. No-one asked us, the organizers of the march, about its underlying idea. Those who attacked us knew better and insisted on their own interpretation of our goals: "Let us not confuse the brutal propaganda of the homosexual orientation with the call for tolerance. For them our term in government will be as dark as the night," said the new Minister of Culture, Kazimierz Ujazdowski.[1]

When on November 19 the demonstrators took to the streets in an act of civil disobedience and the banned Equality March started, the police broke it up by force. 68 of the participants calling for tolerance, democracy, and freedom were detained. The police were brutal: the demonstrators were manhandled, dragged by the hair, and beaten. A young man next to me was thrown on the ground and hit in the kidney region. A female colleague was not allowed to return to get her backpack containing medication. Only when she fainted was a doctor called. The police were ready for all eventualities, with tear gas and water hoses on hand. Fortunately, these were not used. Ludwik Dorn, the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration, called this police operation a "model" one. I shall cite one of his statements for Program I of the Public Radio on November 28, 2005: "Absurd, ridiculous claims have been made on television and in influential newspapers that the demonstration which took place a week ago was brutally broken up. Anyone who saw the TV footage must have noticed that the police treated the participants of this illegal demonstration considerately and gently, simply lifting them off the ground and walking them to the vans."[2]

The police operation was clearly targeted against one group. While the participants of the Equality March were calling for "Freedom, equality, tolerance," on the other side of the police cordon a group of aggressive youths was shouting "We'll do to you what Hitler did to the Jews," "Adolf Hitler, Rudolf Hess," "Gas the faggots," "We won't give up Poznań to you, faggots and perverts." The police did no more than write down the personal information of the participants of this illegal gathering, detaining only 15 of the most hot-headed youths. A group of All-Polish Youth remained in the street almost to the very end. But then, how else could the police have reacted to these fascist slogans when one of the higher-ranking officers shouted in our direction: "Perverts! You need treatment! You thought you could break the law? You won't get away with it now!"[3]

We chose civil disobedience and we bore the consequences of this choice. But the March showed the scale of the problem of intolerance, homophobia, and hatred in Poland. What also became apparent was the lack of respect for democratic principles, which can be stretched by manipulating constitutional law. In these November events many people came to see a symbol of the 4th Republic of Poland.[4]

Both the Provincial Administrative Court (on December 14, 2005) and the Constitutional Tribunal (on January 18, 2006) ruled in favor of the organizers. The Provincial Administrative Court ruled that the ban on the March had been illegal for, according to the logic used by the mayor and the governor, all demonstrations would have to be banned if there were groups that did not like the idea of these demonstrations. That could not be allowed to happen, the Administrative Court ruled. The freedom of assembly is one of the most important rights in a democratic state and should be respected by public administration executives. Meanwhile, the Commissioner for Civil Rights Protection filed a complaint in the Constitutional Tribunal concerning the traffic regulations which make the constitutional freedom of public assembly subject to concession. On January 18, 2006, the Tribunal ruled that it is unconstitutional to require permits for organizing gatherings on public roads.

There were also positive reactions from representatives of international organizations. UN representatives sent a letter of inquiry to the Polish Ministry of Justice concerning the Equality Parade in Warsaw and the Equality March in Poznań. Homophobia and discrimination against sexual minorities as well as banning marches were also discussed in the European parliament on January 18, 2006.

Thus the Equality March ultimately proved a great success.[5] It is worth considering the role of the media in this turbulent period as the March also became a major media spectacle, being inscribed in the logic of the media show. As far back as 1967, Guy Debord argued that the capitalist society is governed by the law of the spectacle. A great accumulation of spectacles occurs and "everything that had hitherto been experienced first-hand recedes till it becomes a spectacle."[6] Image supplants reality. Everything is consumed and put up for sale in the form of a spectacle. Jean Baudrillard's diagnosis of contemporary culture was quite similar: the reality is insignificant; what matters are its infinite simulations. In the culture of spectacle the TV image has become the most important; television has come to shape the opinions and tastes of contemporary people. Outlining the postmodern ideas about the relation between television and reality John Fiske wrote that television rather than representing (re-presenting) a fragment of reality creates or

constructs it. An objective, empirical reality does not exist. It is only a product of discourse. Rather than registering reality, the camera and microphone merely encode it. Coding imposes an ideological meaning on reality.[7] We therefore need to ask how the Equality March was coded and how it became a fact constructed by the media.

It is important to emphasize right away a certain ambivalence: on the one hand, that friendly attitude of most of the media and, on the other, the constant distortion of facts. The media represented the event as "the gay and lesbian March." It was also frequently called a "Parade" (or "Gay Parade"), while the solidarity with Poznań rallies were represented as "solidarity with gays rallies" ("Wiadomości," 7:30 p.m., Program 1 TVP, November 26, 2005). They were announced ahead of time as rallies organized by gay organizations (though they were, in fact, organized by the Green 2004 party, Women's Agreement, the Anarchist Federation, and other groups).

One of the most curious manipulation was the footage on the life of gay people in Poznań included in the main evening news program "Wiadomości" on TVP1 (November 21, 2005). As co-organizers of the march, Marta Jermaczek and myself were asked to speak about sexual minorities. The woman journalist insistently asked questions solely about gays and lesbians while we kept saying that the March was intended to bring attention to the problem of minorities in general. It came as a shock to us when we learned that "Wiadomości" used the footage but showed us with partly concealed faces, under false names, and we were introduced as a homosexual couple. This was done without our knowledge and approval. Against our interest as public persons and Green 2004 party activists we were shown anonymously. We were not disturbed by the fact that we had been represented as a homosexual couple, although Marta Jermaczek later said in an interview that it was hard to guess the purpose of this representation which was much like introducing a blonde as a brunette.[8] The representation was inscribed in the logic which makes discrimination against sexual minorities a matter of concern for those minorities alone. We witnessed a case of conscious manipulation.

Representatives of the media reporting on the Equality March and the Solidarity with Poznań Rallies made a silent assumption that these events were organized by extremists and radicals. In some accounts we were equated with the All-Polish Youth and the hooligans who attacked us. This seems to be part of a broader media strategy described by Agnieszka Graff in the essay "You are Cute When You Get Angry: Radical Feminism and the Mainstream Media."[9] It is commonly recognized that the media need and thrive on conflict. According to Graff, the media "need simple stories,

preferably ones that are constructed around a clear contrast or dramatic conflict."[10] They seek our situations where on two sides of a barricade there are radically different groups that can be contrasted in an unambiguous fashion. Thus the Polish media readily report on the March 8 feminist "Manifa," Equality Parades and Marches, as well as other events featuring feminists on one side and the All-Polish Youth on the other.

One such event and its repercussions in the media is analyzed by Justyna Włodarczyk in "Women on the Waves - A Media Affair: The Polish Media Coverage of the Langenort."[11] As the author points out, as a result of the visit of the Dutch organization Women on Waves, which uses a ship to enter countries where abortion is banned, "it was possible to accomplish something feminists have long been trying to do: get the media to take an interest in women's lives, though not exactly on terms set by the women who staged the event."[12] Moreover, initially the media were negatively disposed towards the feminists, presenting the event with irony, a lack of understanding, or, at best, with a cool reserve. Yet the situation began to change on closer contact, and particularly when the media came face to face with the aggression of the Langenort's opponents. Those who posed as "the protectors of life turned out to be ordinary hooligans throwing paint, eggs, and words of abuse at the feminists. From then on the media began to represent the situation as a war of the sexes, but one in which men were the aggressors. "The leaders of Women on Waves were cast in the role of damsels in distress whom any decent man should protect from the brutes wielding paint and eggs."[13] For this transformation to occur it was necessary to find a stereotypical framework: "The feminists had to be feminized. What do real women do? They run, squeal, and are fearful. Bad men chase and attack them."[14] Włodarczyk's analysis is useful for reading the Equality March because it shows a mechanism according to which the media necessarily rely on specific conventions. The friendliness of the media after the brutal pacification of the March may have had something to do with the visible aggression of the counter-demonstrators shouting fascist slogans and of the police. After all, it was impossible to take the side of the two latter groups. What is more, the journalists observing these events first-hand found themselves in the thick of things. When the police made their move, the journalists' faces showed signs of fear. Several were mistakenly identified as demonstrators: the police attempted to book them and put them in the vans. The atmosphere of aggression and brutality was rendered best in Wanda Wasilewska's coverage for Radio Mekury, also broadcast on Program 3 of the Polish Radio (November 30, 2005, 10:00 p.m.).

Writing about the Langenort, Włodarczyk says: "In this script the women become the victims. . . . Public opinion bought this script and

sighed with relief, for it allowed the public to side with the Women on Waves without necessarily supporting the ship's mission."[15] A similar argument can be applied to the Equality Marches. Their participants were first transformed into victims - first, of the aggressive young men in football scarves armed with, eggs, horse manure, and epithets, and then of the police, whose actions undermined the sense of public order and safety. The police is generally expected to punish wrongdoers, though some of us still remember that under martial law the police and riot squads (ZOMO) often punished those who were good and innocent. It is no accident that during the pacification of the march many of us immediately thought of the riot squads of the 1980s. Some members of the public were appalled at this comparison with martial law or the fact that we used the term "the Poznań incidents." Marcin Kęszycki, an actor of the Theater of the 8th Day, who was harassed and brutally beaten by the security forces in the 1980s, responds in the following words to a journalist's comment that using the martial law analogy is ridiculous: "some colleagues who belong to my generation also find it ridiculous. I don't. For me this is as serious as it was back then. The drama is somewhat different, as are the decorations. My generation fought for democracy while these young people are fighting so that it won't wither . . . . My colleagues from the theater and I went there out of solidarity. When we got there I realized that I had been deprived of my right to civil disobedience. In Poznań the beginning of the 4th Republic was marked by a police attack."[16]

Television audiences and newspaper readers saw images of young, pretty, well-dressed women being dragged along the street by policemen, frail-looking boys yanked by force out of the sitting crowd. We saw policemen expressing anger and engaging in violent behavior. Yes, the sitting protesters were a colorful, young, and good-looking group. Esthetic considerations undoubtedly were important. The media captured and emphasized those elements. Of all the protesters the one featured in the largest number of media representations was a girl wearing an army helmet and a bright garland of artificial flowers around her neck.[17] The contrast between the protesters and the police also emerged in press photographs of women with lighted candles in their hands standing in front of the police cordon, and of other women pointing at a peace sign of candles, whose light is reflected in the policemen's shields. Thus emblems of color and peaceful protest were contrasted with police aggression.

Perhaps that is why Minister Dorn attempted to convince us that no brutality was involved in the police operation (as if what we had seen was an illusion) and spoke of the "uncommonly courteous and gentle treatment of the participants who were lifted off the ground." He may have consciously been trying to construct a media fact,

since sensitive, good-looking people require "uncommonly gentle treatment." Such words have a calming effect. When one has gone through the traumatic experience of being afraid of the police, complete disempowerment, and the violation of one's private space, it is difficult to rationalize what happened.

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